# **SEDA Project Abstract**

## Project Title

Developing developers: using insights from international students’ experiences to enhance educational design

## Project Investigators

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## Project Background

The higher education landscape in the UK, much like in other parts of the world, continues to see greater internationalization. While the HE sector has increasingly embraced EDI principles in the recent years, the changing student demographic and need to provide an inclusive educational experience for both home and international students has not received commensurate attention. Recent reports have challenged the HE sector to view international students as ‘pedagogic partners’ and not ‘cash cows’, as well as to move away from a ‘deficit narrative’ that characterises international students as ‘lacking’ or ‘challenging’. Our project addressed this important knowledge and action gap using a students-as-partners approach. We engaged with international students to elicit their conceptualization of ‘sense of belonging’ and co-designed a survey instrument to better understand the lived experiences of their peers across the institution.

## Project Findings and Impact

Although the pedagogical literature has multiple reports on the ‘students-as-partners’ approach, these are largely in the context of curriculum or assessment design. A staff-student partnership to co-create a survey to elicit information on the student lived experience was found to encompass different challenges. However, we were successful in leveraging existing frameworks1-3 to explore the nexus between safe spaces, sense of belonging and co-creation. Prior to survey co-creation, we designed and engaged in a structured process of weekly engagement to create a safe space where students could belong and feel comfortable to explore their own experiences. This was achieved through a series of ice-breaking and low barrier activities, which produced a rich characterisation of the key elements of being an international student in the UK, as well as a successful ‘students-as-partners’ approach that transcends assessment or curriculum design settings. The genuine partnership that we had forged with the students left a very positive impact on their overall experience, as evidenced in the student quotes provided below.

‘I have learned from this opportunity that I want to be involved in creating a space for other co-creative workshops and uplifting the voices of underrepresented people and creating change at the grassroot level.’

‘It was also a great relief to learn that we all struggle with the same problems, this made me feel less alone! I'm also glad that I participated in a project that aims to help international students make their transition here easier.’

The survey that was co-designed with the students was widely circulated at the University to gain more comprehensive insights. A total of 41 responses were received and the survey investigated wide-ranging issues from mental health and academic issues to cultural and social considerations. 76% of the respondents expressed having interests in University-wide cultural events but nearly one in every two students stated that they ‘feel isolated’ from their course mates as an international student. These insights from the survey and the student partnership were then discussed in a join student-staff forum where academics and educational developers were invited. University staff were asked to reflect on the ramifications of the findings and how these could be used to inform and change their practice, which also allowed immediate feedback to be offered by students.

In terms of wider impact, the findings from the staff-student partnership and the survey instrument are feeding into student success initiatives being planned at the University. The importance of safe spaces and community building in forging genuine partnerships with international students was also shared to external audiences at the SEDA Spring Conference 2024.

## References

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2 Bovill, C., & Bulley, C. J. (2011). A model of active student participation in curriculum design: exploring desirability and possibility.

3 Holley, L. C., & Steiner, S. (2005). Safe space: Student perspectives on classroom environment. *Journal of social work education*, *41*(1), 49-64